

## **HHS and VA News Release**

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### **VA and Health and Human Services Sign Agreement To Improve Health Care for American Indian Veterans**

WASHINGTON -- Rural American Indians and Alaska Natives who served in the military will receive enhanced medical care as a result of a new agreement by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi and Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy G. Thompson today announced a formal agreement that will encourage cooperation and resource sharing between the two agencies to make sure veterans who are American Indians or Alaska Natives receive quality health care.

"VA and HHS are setting the stage for an ongoing collaboration to provide optimal health care for more than 165,000 American Indian and Alaska Native veterans," Principi said. "We are combining our strengths and expertise to improve health care for these veterans, particularly to increase access and enhance services."

While there have been localized efforts between VA health care facilities and Indian Health Service (IHS) clinics in the past, this agreement will encourage additional agency-wide cooperation, affecting all Indian nations.

"Our two departments have a history of working together to care for America's veterans and underserved communities," Thompson said. "Under this new agreement, the Indian Health Service and VA will work to improve health care for our American Indian and Alaska Native veterans by sharing information, developing health promotion programs and allowing for joint appointments, financial reimbursements and provider certification."

VA Deputy Secretary Dr. Leo S. Mackay Jr. and HHS Deputy Secretary Claude A. Allen formally signed the memorandum of understanding today at the National Congress of American Indians Executive Council's winter session in Washington, D.C.

In addition, the agreement between VA and HHS will improve communication between the agencies and tribal governments and create opportunities to develop strategies for sharing information and information technology. The technology sharing will include VA's electronic medical record system, bar code medication administration and telemedicine. VA and IHS will co-sponsor continuing medical training for their health care staffs.

The VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the United States, providing a broad spectrum of medical, surgical and rehabilitative care for veterans. Nearly 4.3 million veterans received care in VA health care facilities in 2002.

The mission of the Indian Health Service, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, is to raise the physical, mental and spiritual health of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest levels. The IHS operates a comprehensive health service delivery system for approximately 1.6 million members of federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes.

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